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Commentary on: Michael A. Gilbert's "Emotion as permeative: Attempting to model the unidentifiable"

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Gilbert makes a case against those who would downplay the importance of emotion on the grounds that (a) both reason and emotion can become unbalanced ("out of control"); (b) emotion is needed for good decision-making; and (c) the rejection of emotion is deeply implicated within the practices of patriarchy.

In reading the paper for this response, I was most struck by the way that disciplinary perspectives inform the problems that we see when we come to the study of argumentation. Some established paradigm emerges in scholarship and proclaims that "everything is X," pressing everyone to pay attention to X. The next move, of course, is to problematize that global claim, and demand attention to Y, as a curious way of not being X.

Coming at argumentation studies from a discipline that tends to put propositions (logic) and propositional attitudes (epistemology) at the center of attention, Gilbert in opposition sees the problem as one of carving out space for curiously non-propositional materials like emotions.

By contrast, the disciplinary tradition of rhetoric puts civic deliberations at the center of attention. Within what Kenneth Burke termed the Barnyard of our civic life, emotions and their close cousins moods, desires, passions, interests, preferences, motives, perspectives, climates of opinion and worldviews obviously reign supreme. They are, to use Gilbert's word, "permeative." As the early American orator Fisher Ames proclaimed, "the only constant agents in political affairs are the passions of men." Thus the original studiers of civic deliberations wrote treatises of rhetoric focused just on appeals to emotion (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I.1). So when those of us from rhetorical and allied communication fields come to the study of argumentation, we often see the problem as one of carving room out of all this emotion-stuff for the curious activity of giving good reasons.

Aristotle's own treatise of rhetoric focused largely on the possibilities of *logos* (as well as aiming to establish *ethos* as a distinct form of rhetorical appeal, not just a mild sort of *pathos*, Fortenbaugh, 1992). In contemporary argumentation studies, Scott Jacobs has adopted a similar approach. According to his seminal "Rhetoric and Dialectic from the Standpoint of Normative Pragmatics" (2000), the study of argumentation must attend to "the contingencies, possibilities and limits of actual situations" characterized by "limited information, imagination and time, questionable motive, vested interest, complex social arrangements, and so forth" (p. 274)—a list that Jacobs would undoubtedly be willing to extend to include

emotions. One key task of argumentation theory is to explain how these possibly good-reason-unfriendly “actual situations” can be reconstructed by the arguers in order put themselves “in a position to decide if claims should be reasonably accepted or rejected” (p. 274). We need to find out how argumentative discourse manages “to encourage mutual, voluntary, free, comprehensive, open, fair, impartial, considered, reasoned, informed, reflective, and involved engagement” (p. 274) even within the cacophonous Barnyard.

The essays which have been filling out this normative pragmatic program for argumentation studies do not aim to show how reason can overcome emotion. Rather, the focus is on how argumentative discourse can create a situation in which a normatively appropriate complex of reasons and emotions (and other features) prevails. There are several possibilities worth considering.

On one hand, emotional appeals can create circumstances in which an giving good reasons can begin to be productive. Jacobs himself goes on to analyze a quite strident emotional appeal, and concludes that “here and in many other controversies emotional appeals can play a constructive role in deliberation and may be positively required by the situation” (p. 277). He explains:

Among other situations, there are those where an audience does not take seriously the urgency or moral gravity of the problems addressed by an advocate but they should. Under these circumstances effective emotional appeals may not degrade the deliberative capacities of an audience; they may enhance them. Likewise, expressions of incredulity and moral outrage may be practical necessities just to be able to re-open what much of the public takes to be an already decided issue and just to lay claim to having a legitimate standpoint in the first place” (p. 277).

On the other hand, giving good reasons can be a necessary component of a legitimate appeal to emotion. Beth Innocenti has explored how this works in a series of useful articles. In her account (2011), an appeal to fear encourages action by creating a situation in which auditors may be criticized for inattention and lack of public spirit if they do not respond quickly and appropriately to a speaker’s dire warnings. At the same time, however, in making a fear appeal the speaker is putting her own public standing at risk; she has to defend her right to arouse the auditors’ emotions by offering good arguments for the impending threat. Appeals to shame have a similar structure (2007); a speaker can help her audience see that their behaviour is rightfully characterized as shameful, but only at the cost of undertaking to support that charge with good reasons.

Central to all this work is a basic understanding that the giving of good reasons is an important enough activity to deserve distinguishing from all the other activities that are happening in argumentative discourse. We even bite the bullet and call a good reason that gets given by its ordinary name, argument. Jacobs (2000) urges us to accept a characterization of arguments as

fundamentally linguistic entities that express with a special pragmatic force propositions, where those propositions stand in particular inferential relations to one another. If you cannot explicate from a message such propositional assemblies and modes of expression, the message is not an argument. (p. 264)

Or to put it in simpler and traditional terms, an argument has been made when some discourse openly displays a premise/conclusion structure—a reason. Why is it worth characterizing arguments this narrowly? Because, as Jacobs (2000) explains, “arguments have some distinctive properties—properties that are crucial to their privileged status as modes of gaining warranted assent, reasoned adherence, voluntary and informed acceptance” (p. 264). And in addition to warranting assent, good reasons give us the tools to critique unexamined, unstated or actively occluded assumptions; they allow us to gain increased clarity about what we are talking about; they grant legitimacy to claims that might otherwise be dismissed; and they are uttered in the enduring (however counterfactual) hope that others—everyone—will eventually see reason.

So, speaking from the normative pragmatic perspective, Gilbert’s call for students of argumentation to attend to more cognitive/affective attitudes than just belief is welcome (see Pinto 2009, 2010). Also welcome is his insistence on examining arguments in their full contexts, including the context of the emotional states from which they are spoken and in which they are heard (see Jacobs 1999, quoting Austin: “the total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating”). But a goal of “reintegrating emotion and reason,” or establishing “emotional argument,” that we find less compelling. It is precisely the fact that “emotion is permeative” which renders so curious the small but unique contributions that giving good reasons makes to our civic life.

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